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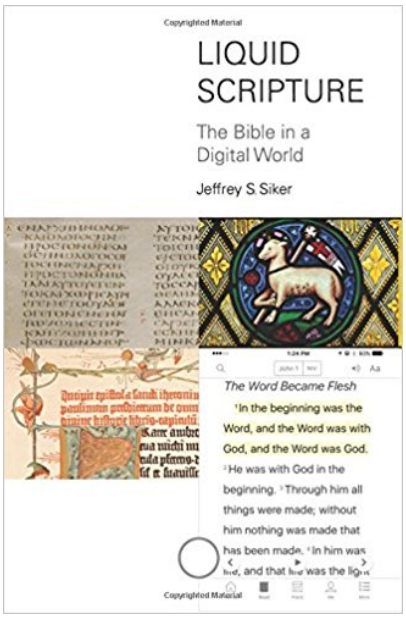

Jeffrey S. Siker

Liquid Scripture: The Bible in a Digital World

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Surprisingly, *Liquid Scripture* is the first monograph devoted to the Bible in the digital age. What makes this surprising is that the first tool linking the Bible to a computer was built in the 1950s by John W. Ellison, who prepared an index of the English Revised Standard Version of the Bible (Jones, 2016, 100–101) parallel to Busa's *Thomas Aquinus Index*. Nobody remembers Ellison's name today, whereas the name of Roberto Busa is still honored by a regular award prize awarded in the digital humanities milieu (http://adho.org/awards/roberto-busa-prize). We can only be grateful to Jeffrey Siker for work on the topic: the digital turn is considered as the most important since the transition from scrolls to codices, according to Roger Chartier (2001, 8) and Christian Vandendorpe (2009, 127).

In the introduction (ch. 1), "A Transition of Biblical Proportions," Siker sketches a global, pedagogical picture of our relationship to the digital world: "We feel naked without our smart-phones to the ready. … The development of the internet, smart phones, and multi-media high-speed communication networks of all kinds has resulted in a world that is ever more connected and intertwined" (1, 3). As evidenced by the latter sentence, from the beginning the audience of the book is clearly defined as Christian and those living Christian practices in (online) communities. Although the author's perspective is presented without ambiguity, further discussion is required.

The introduction is followed by eight chapters that present an initial overview of the research question and will serve as points of reference in further monographs or collected essays on the digital Bible. Chapter 2, "Trajectories in Biblical Technology," presents an exploration of how developments in the production and material form of the Bible have affected its interpretation—from scroll to codex to printing. Chapter 3, "A Brief History of Digital Bibles," argues that digital Bibles have developed along two basic tracks: one oriented primarily toward the academic community and one oriented primarily toward the church community. Chapter 4, "This Is Your Brain on Screens," recounts what we have learned to date about what happens in our brains when we read words on screens as opposed to words on printed pages. This chapter relies notably on Maryanne Wolf's *Proust and the Squid* (2007) and on the French neuroscientist Stanislas Dehaene's *Reading in the Brain* (2009).

Chapter 5, "Survey Says!," examines emerging practices with respect to digital Bibles as seen in a variety of surveys by the American Bible Society, among other studies. It provides explanations as to how the Bible is evolving into many digital expressions. For Siker, it "results in a loss of knowing the geography, the shape, of the biblical text itself. This is where the notion of 'liquid scripture' especially comes into play. When the Bible ceases to be a physical book, not only does it result in a loss of tangibility, it also results in a textual world that is now virtually (literally, virtually!) watered down, so that the contours of the text can become diluted and murky" (5). The main thesis of the book is summarized in chapter 5.

In Chapter 6, "Is There a Bible in This Church?," the *liquid* character of digital Bibles is fully analyzed. Siker argues that it has both positive and negative consequences. This chapter analyzes the impact on the translations from ancient original languages to modern languages. In this chapter Siker rightly demonstrates how much translation is a sensitive question in digital culture: Google is far from solving the translation question; on the contrary, it reveals the multiplicity of languages. This chapter also analyzes the consequences of the digital Bible on congregations and worship; this should prove to be useful to students and scholars researching issues in practical theology today. Applications such as *YouVersion* are presented.

Chapter 7, "Digital Bibles and Social Media," takes a close look at the role of digital Bibles on four particularly prominent social media platforms: blogs, Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. How have these social media interfaces affected the ways in which we read and discuss the Bible for better and for worse? For Siker, "the use of the Bible on Twitter and Facebook typically results in relatively shallow understandings of the Bible, whereas there is far more room for deeper engagement with the Bible via both blogs and YouTube" (7). Chapter 8, "The Bible and Computer Programs," presents computer-based programs that

provide significant tools for engaging in deeper study of the Bible (such as Logos, Accordance, Logos, BibleWorks, and Olive Tree Software: all contain powerful tools for advanced Bible study). Thanks to a focus on clear indications and explanations, this practical chapter should prove to be particularly useful in a quickly expanding domain. The chapter also considers the question of the public domain, a subject that is sensitive for all scholars and their work. Finally, chapter 9, "Biblical Pasts and Digital Futures," brings together a more synthetic digest of the blessings and curses that accompany the increasing use of digital Bibles. Siker argues for best practices and worst practices when it comes to the world of digital Bibles and discusses biblical authority in a digital world and the tricky question of the stability of the biblical text.

Siker considers a range of questions related to the digital Bible, from technical questions about the software used to fundamental questions via by questions of accessibility. For example, he notices that older resources are paradoxically more accessible than the newest ones: this creates problematic teaching situations (7). In his material writing chapter, Siker highlights interesting points, such as: "just to give a sense of how quickly things changed with the advent of the printing press, in 1424 (some thirty years before Gutenberg's press) the Cambridge University library owned a total of 122 books. After Gutenberg, by 1500 there were some 15,000 books in print" (32). Or, "Luther's famous 95 Theses went through 14 print runs of 1,000 copies each in 1518 alone" (32). Other points in this same chapter are briefly considered, and further studies on reading practices in antiquity should perhaps have been consulted (e.g., Johnson and Parker 2009). The existence of mini-scrolls—before the mini-codices—showing the emergence of private intimate reading practices (Clivaz 2015) is surely a factor worth considering in general reflections on transition practices. Nevertheless, for the general public and students alike, such an overview approach is welcome.

These remarks recall the question of the audience of Siker's book. Considered from a theological point of view, this book clearly belongs to practical theology. From the first pages, the discourse presents itself as addressed to Christian readers convinced that the Bible is "not just a unified book, but the Book of all books" (9). However, simultaneously this choice is never explained, justified, or explicated: it is simply apparently obvious and ever-present throughout the book. From a European perspective, the perception of the Bible in general culture is quite different from that of the United States. Nevertheless, it is worth considering this sentence : "Even though its contents range far and wide both in terms of historical context and theological vision, when the words 'The Bible' are embossed in gilded lettering on its leather cover and spine it becomes not just a unified book, but the Book of all books. It is no wonder that the Bible continues to be the best-selling book of all time, year after year, version after version, translation after translation" (9).

The question here is really to evaluate if such a statement is true in reference to printed culture rather than today's forms. The French thinker Jean-Claude Carrière contradicts this perception by precisely situating the perception of the Bible as the book of all books as belonging to the previous heritage of printed culture: "Avec les religions du Livre, le livre a servi non seulement de contenant, de réceptacle, mais aussi de 'grand angle' à partir duquel on pouvait tout observer et tout raconter, peut-être même tout décider" (Carrière and Eco 2009, 121). Moreover, the expression "religions of the book"—not *al a quitab*, the people of the book—was born in the second part of the nineteenth century, at the height of printed culture. In two 1870 lectures Friedrich Max Müller sought to present a classification of religions starting from the notion of the book applied to eight religions: "With these eight religions the library of the Sacred Books of the whole human race is complete, and an accurate study of these eight codes, written in Sanskrit, Pâli, and Zend, in Hebrew, Greek, and Arabic, lastly in Chinese, might in itself not seem too formidable an undertaking for a single scholar" (Müller 1882, 56). Thus to this the "religions of the book" topic traces its roots within the height of printed culture.

Thus liquid scripture may lead to a different situation for the Bible in digital culture, and the addressees of Siker's book may be enlarged to include a non-Christian readership. To draw contacts between a Christian readership and general culture could only bring advantages to the discussion. For example, in chapter 6 Siker returns to the famous 1981 Stanley Fish monograph *Is There a Text in This Class?* and attempts to articulate a Christian reading of the Bible and the interpretative communities theory by Fish. Nevertheless, it should be noted that here our author surpasses the next step of the common discussion. Indeed, Bertrand Gervais wrote in the 2008 *Digital Companion to the Literary Studies* a chapter entitled "Is There a Text on This Screen? Reading in an Era of Hypertextuality." It is absolutely necessary to rely on the topic discussed generally in humanities to understand what happens to the Bible specifically in digital culture.

It is what Jeff Siker does successfully in chapter 4, for example, when he offers an overview of the reactions of the brain to digital immersive reading. Haptic memory, reading, and the importance of the touch sense are also evoked (see, e.g., 62–63). He writes, "Here the notion of 'liquid scripture' in different forms might best be compared to how water can be found in solid (ice), liquid, and gaseous (steam) forms. In a parallel manner, Scripture can be found in solid form (the physical print Bible), liquid form (on screens of all kinds), and in a metaphorical gaseous state (spoken word). Different people will, no doubt, be responsive to the multiple forms that Scripture takes as written word, preached word, embodied word, and beyond" (43).

Affirmations about liquid scripture could be developed further based on Tim Hutchings's work demonstrating that the digital Bible is not so liquid: applications such as *YouVersion*

lead to the reinforcement of the usual evangelical thinking framework. Indeed, *YouVersion* was founded by Life.Church, which is not "an independent online community but the online ministry of a single large church founded in the United States in 1996," with thirteen different physical locations in 2009 (Hutchings 2017a). Hutchings's main point is to demonstrate that contrary to several evangelical theologians' opinions, the Bible is not vanishing or becoming liquid when it comes to these applications. They maintain a strong evangelical interpretation framework, using all multimedia possibilities (Hutchings 2017b, 102). Scholarly analyses have to be informed and should consider biblical digital tools as critically as it does it all printed tools. As we can see, Siker's book opens the gates for further discussions, and it is required specifically for such a purpose.

Lastly, it is worth considering an important point enlightened by Siker: "the ready availability of so many translations in digital form results in a certain destabilizing of the biblical text" (5). In each chapter Siker tries to figure out what will become of the Bible online; for example, "The unbound Bible on a screen does not lend itself to an immediate awareness of any particular shape of the Bible, canonical or otherwise. From this perspective skimming the Bible on screens would necessarily seem to undermine understanding the Bible in its canonical frame" (69). This situation could still be strengthened by the audio Bible (171–74). In this "Fast Times and Slow Times" situation (242), a last chapter could have been added on the growing diversification of the Greek editions of the New Testament, with the newest one, the Tyndale House *Greek New Testament*. The flexibility of the Greek New Testament text itself is surely one of the clearer features of the digital Bible era.

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